

**COMPARATIVE RESEARCH IN EDUCATION:
A MODE OF GOVERNANCE OR A HISTORICAL JOURNEY?**

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Abstract

This text is not a research paper, nor an epistemological reflection about the field of Comparative Education. It is an essay in the literal meaning of the word – “an attempt, trial, that needs to be put to test in order to understand if it is able to fulfil the expectations” – in which we introduce an interpretation of the current condition of the field of comparative education.

In the introduction to this essay we discuss the current phenomenon of a regained popularity of comparative educational research. We believe that this situation has both positive and negative consequences: it can contribute to the renewal of the field or it may be no more than a brief fashion. Our reflections focus on the uses of comparative research in education, not on any precise research question. Even so, only for illustrative purposes, we present some examples related with the European Union.

We then go on to discuss current comparative practices, arguing that comparative educational studies are used as a political tool creating educational policy, rather than a research method or an intellectual inquiry. In the two main sections of this text we define two extreme positions: comparison as a *mode of governance* and comparison as a *historical journey*. We do recognize that between these two extremes there is room enough to imagine different positions and dispositions. But our intention is to analytically separate very different traditions of the comparative field.

Throughout the article we build a case in favour of a comparative-historical approach. Nevertheless, we argue that the reconciliation between “history” and “comparison” will only be possible if we adopt new conceptions of *space* and *time*, and of *space-time relationship*. This is a condition required for the understanding of comparative research in education as a historical journey.

1. INTRODUCTION: WHY THE REGAINED POPULARITY OF COMPARATIVE RESEARCH?

Disciplines are in their little world rather similar to nation-states, as their timing, size, boundaries and character are, of course, historically contingent. Both organizations tend to generate their founding and historical myths. Both claim contested sovereignty over a certain territory. Both fight wars of boundaries and secession. Both have elaborate mechanisms and procedures for the production of organizational identity and loyalty, and both are also undercut or transcended by cross-boundary identities and loyalties (Therborn, 2000, p. 275).

The definitions, boundaries and configurations of the field of Comparative Education have changed and reshaped throughout the history of 19th and 20th centuries, influenced by the way in which educational policy has been conducted, as well as by distinct conceptions of knowledge. The formulation of educational knowledge – what is important to know and what should or should not be reflected in the study and practice of education – has historically been a consequence of social and political as well as academic developments. More than an epistemological discussion, these developments entail a process that is historically contingent, vulnerable and reflective of the political mood and intellectual space that they express.

In the past decade, it seems that there has been an important process of re-acceptance of the comparative perspective within various disciplines, among them within educational research. After being ostracized for several decades, comparative approaches are regaining their popularity, both as a method of inquiry and as a frame of analysis. It is a situation that has both positive and negative consequences: on the one hand, it can contribute to reconstitute a field of research that has been unable to distinguish itself as a sound intellectual project over the years; on the other hand, it can be regarded as a vague fashion, and thus disappear as suddenly as it appeared.

The renewed interest in comparative education is a consequence of a process of political reorganization of the world-space, calling into question educational systems that for centuries have been imagined on a national basis (Crossley, 2002). In fact, developments in Comparative Education need to be placed within a larger framework of historical and societal transitions. This has been the case in the past and it is the case in the present. In attempting to determine specific times at which this field has gained legitimacy and popularity, a tentative chronology becomes apparent:

1880s - Knowing the “other”

At the end of the 19th century, the transfer and circulation of ideas, in relation to the worldwide diffusion of mass schooling, created a curiosity to *know* other countries and educational processes. International missions, the organization of universal exhibitions and the production of international encyclopaedias, all led to the emergence of the discipline of Comparative Education, which was intended to help national reformers in their efforts to build national systems of education.

1920s - Understanding the “other”

World War I inspired an urgent sense of the necessity for international cooperation and mutual responsibility. Concomitant with this impulse was a desire to *understand* the “other”, both “other” powers and “other” countries, bringing with it an interest in different forms of knowledge production, schooling and education. To build a “new world” meant, first of all, to educate a “new man” which implied a “new school”. The need to compare naturally arose, concentrating on educational policies as well as on

pedagogical movements.

1960s - Constructing the “other”

The post-colonial period witnessed a renewal of comparative approaches. The need *to construct* the “other”, namely in terms of building educational systems in the “new countries”, led to the dissemination of development policies, at a time when education was considered a main source of social and economic progress. The work accomplished within international agencies, as well as the presence and influence of a “scientific approach” that was developed as the basis of comparative studies, created educational solutions that were exported to different countries and regions.

2000s - Measuring the “other”

In a world defined through flux of communication and inter-dependent networks, the growing influence of comparative studies is linked to a global climate of intense economic competition and a growing belief in the key role of education in the endowment of marginal advantage. The major focus of much of this comparative research is inspired by a need to create international tools and comparative indicators *to measure* the “efficiency” and the “quality” of education.

By recognizing these *moments of transition* it is possible to recognize the interrelation between comparative research and societal and political projects. This connection is visible in recent developments, as much as it was in historical processes of change – see, for example, the overview provided by Kazamias (2001) of the episteme of Comparative Education in the USA and England, providing yet another point of view of the history of the field.

Currently, we are witnessing a growing interest for comparative approaches. On the one hand, politicians are seeking for “international educational indicators”, in order to build educational plans that are legitimized by a kind of “comparative global enterprise”. On the other hand, researchers are adopting “comparative methods”, in order to get additional resources and symbolic advantages (for instance, the case of the European Union where the “comparative criterion” is a requisite for financing social research). The problem is that the term *comparison* is being mainly used as a flag of convenience, intended to attract international interest and money and to entail the need to assess national policies with reference to world scales and hierarchies. The result is a “soft comparison” lacking any solid theoretical or methodological grounds.

Studies conducted and published by such organizations as the *International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement* (IEA), the *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA-OECD) or the indicators set up to assess the *Quality of School Education* (European Union) illustrate well this construction of knowledge and policy. The significance of these organizations is immense, as their conclusions and recommendations tend to shape policy debates and to set discursive agendas, influencing educational policies around the world (Crossley, 2002). Such researches produce a set of conclusions, definitions of “good” or “bad” educational systems, and required solutions. Moreover, the mass media are keen to diffuse the results of these studies, in such a manner that reinforces a need for urgent decisions, following lines of action that seem undisputed and uncontested, largely due to the fact that they have been internationally asserted. In fact, as Nelly Stromquist argues, “the diffusion of ideas concerning school ‘efficiency’, ‘accountability’, and ‘quality control’ – essentially Anglo-American constructs – are turning schools all over the world into poor copies of romanticized view of private firms” (2000, p. 262).

The academic critique of these kinds of studies is well established:

Most recent of all, arguably, has been the advent of the language of performance indicators – the identification of explicit dimensions to represent ‘quality’, ‘efficiency’ or ‘success’ of education systems and of individual institutions within them. The growing internationalization of this activity in recent years (...) marks perhaps the most powerful and insidious development to date in the process of the world-domination of one particular educational model (Broadfoot, 2000, p. 360).

Our intention is not to reiterate this intellectual and academic critique, but to insist on the importance of comparative approaches as a way to legitimize national policies on the basis of “international measures”. What counts is not so much the traditional “international argument”, but instead the circulation of languages that tend to impose as “evident” and “natural” specific solutions for educational problems. Curiously enough, education is regarded, simultaneously, through a “global eye” and a “national eye”, because there is a widely held assumption that education is one of the few remaining institutions over which national governments still have effective powers (Kress, 1996). It is important to acknowledge this paradox: the attention to *global* benchmarks and indicators serves to promote *national* policies in a field (education), that is imagined as a place where national sovereignty can still be exercised.

It is not so much the question of cross-national comparisons, but the creation and ongoing re-creations of “global signifiers” based on international competition and assessments. This, in turn, fosters specific comparative methodologies and theoretical frameworks that are useful for such analysis. In this never-ending process, questions regarding units of analysis and the influence of “international categories” arise. What would be the cultural, societal, and even more so political consequences of these global benchmarks? How can or should the academic research of education, and specifically the field of comparative education foster such practices? What would all this eventually bring into the practice of educational planning? These questions all arise and become especially significant in the current flow of research and knowledge (Crossley, 2002; Grant, 2000).

Let us elaborate on the European situation to make this point more visible. In an official document of the European Union, *The concrete future objectives of education and training systems*, it is stated:

While we must preserve the differences of structure and system, which reflect the identities of the countries and regions of Europe, we must also recognize that our main objectives, and the results we all seek, are strikingly similar. We should build on those similarities to learn from each other, to share our successes and failures, and to use education together to advance European citizens and European society into the new millennium (2001, p. 37).

In practice, since the mid 1980s, but particularly in recent years, the programs and guidelines that have been implemented at the European level reflect the adoption of a “common language” of education. New ways of thinking about education have been defined, carrying on governing principles that tended to impose “one single perspective” and, consequently, tended to de-legitimize all alternative positions. Of course, no country will abdicate a rhetoric affirming its “national identity”. Yet, all European Union member states end up incorporating identical guidelines and discourses, all of which are presented as the only way to overcome educational and social problems. The strength of these guidelines resides in their acceptance by different countries with a “sense of inevitability”. In the upcoming years we will witness the deepening of this

contradiction: national politicians will proclaim that education is the exclusive responsibility of each member state, even as they adopt common European programs and policies (Novoa, 2002).

The recent popularity of Comparative Education must be explained through this internationalization of educational policies, leading to the diffusion of global patterns and flows of knowledge that are assumed to be applicable in various places. It is important to underline that these international indicators and benchmarks are not spontaneously generated. On the contrary, they are the result of policy-oriented educational and social research. In saying this, we come to the heart of this article; These current trends, as presented, create a unique occasion for comparative educational research which can lead to either the impoverishment of the field, reducing it to a “mode of governance” or, on the contrary, that can contribute to its intellectual renewal, through more sophisticated historical and theoretical references. These two possibilities will be analysed in the following sections of this article.

2. COMPARABILITY AS A MODE OF GOVERNANCE

Although the world is witnessing the emergence of new forms of political organization, and a renewed attention is being paid to questions of how communities are imagined, it is clear that the political and societal form of the nation-state will not disappear in a near future, and the end of the era of nationalism is not remotely in sight (Anderson, 1991). World relations tend to be defined through complex communication networks and languages that consolidate new powers and regulations. International criteria and comparative references are used as a reaction to the crisis of political legitimacy that is undermining democratic regimes around the world. The statement “We are all comparatists now” illustrates a global trend, one that perceives comparison as a method that would find “evidence” and hence legitimize political action. This perception of the political role of comparative research places the comparative approaches in a position that carries a responsibility, and consequently entails the production of policy decisions and actions by definitions of standards, outcomes and benchmarks.

The enthusiasm towards comparative research has two major consequences that we believe are crucial to the academic field of Comparative Education: the society of the “international” spectacle and the politics of mutual accountability.

The society of the “international” spectacle. In conceptualizing the idea of the “spectacle” one should consider a societal sphere in which the definitions of reality, history, time, and space are all transformed into a symbol. Even if there is no single core of control, the society of the spectacle “functions as if there were such a point of central control” (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 323). In this societal sphere there is an excess of mirrors, creating the illusion of several images that, indeed, always reflect the same way of thinking. That is why “surveillance” and “spectacle” are not divergent positions. Surveillance is exercised through an exposure to public opinion, a spectacular display of indicators, ultimately serving to control individuals and performances. Spectacle is subject to rules of surveillance (surveys, audits, etc.) that define its own characteristics, creating an interpretative framework. According to Hardt and Negri, the spectacle “destroys any collective form of sociality and at the same time imposes a new mass sociality, a new uniformity of action and thought” (2000, pp. 321-322). Politics is influenced, and in a certain sense constructed, through a systematic exposure to surveys, questionnaires and other means of data collection that would, or are perceived to have the

ability to, estimate “public opinion”. This ongoing collection, production and publication of surveys leads to an “instant democracy”, a regime of urgency that provokes a permanent need for self-justification. Roland Hagenbüchle rightly points out that “the mediatization of political life reduces politics to a public spectacle”, impeding any critical discussion (2001, p. 3). We argue that by using comparable measures and benchmarks as policy we are, in fact, creating an international spectacle, one that is deeply influencing the formation of new policies and conceptions of education.

The politics of mutual accountability. The second important consequence related to the changing roles of comparative research has to do with a politics of mutual accountability. Here, the expert-discourse plays an important role through the production of concepts, methodologies and tools used to compare educational systems. The idea of “mutual accountability” brings a sense of sharing and participation, inviting each country (and each citizen) to a perpetual comparison to the other. In fact, much more than a horizontality of exchanges, this process brings a kind of verticality, that is a system of classification of schools according to standards that are accepted without critical discussion. To illustrate this process, a look at the European context is again useful. Within this context the idea of “Europeanization” of education has provoked the development of a strong feeling of mutual accountability, based on an evaluation of, or a comparison between, national systems of education, using a series of indicators, outcomes, benchmarks and guidelines. The important point here is that political intervention of the European Union in education is legitimized through this process of comparison. There is no danger of adopting homogeneous or uniform lines of development in each member state, because EU regulations don’t allow this possibility. But through “agreements”, “communication”, “exchange”, “transfer” and “joint reflection”, that is, through a logic of comparison, the European nations will progressively adopt a common understanding of the “best practices”, and hence will implement similar policies in the so-called European educational space. The construction of comparable indicators serves as a “reference point” that will eventually lead the various national institutions to “freely” adopt the same kind of actions and perspectives within the educational field.

Our perspective is that both the processes of “international spectacle” and “mutual accountability” are achieved by way of comparison, defining a new mode of governance. In using the term governance one is bound to fall into various and often confusing definitions. Ironically, with the ever-enhancing discourses of “liberalism”, “democracy” and “freedom” the discussion of governance is increasingly becoming a central topic for any societal analysis, bringing with it different conceptions of hierarchy and power. Curiously enough, governance is often defined through a series of related terms and expressions, such as soft-regulation, open method of coordination, contract culture, flexible frameworks, partnerships, target setting, auditing, open-ended processes, or benchmarking.

In trying to grasp the concept of governance, political scientists end up showing how it works as a kind of “screen” that, in fact, keeps our sight away from new processes of power formation. The crucial point is that of *legitimacy*. Let us look again at the European Union and the efforts that are being done to overcome its famous “democratic deficit”. Interestingly enough, the issues that are being raised do not direct our attention to a deepening of democratic decisions, but instead to a reinforcement of “new means” (governance, benchmarking, exchange of “good practices”, etc.) and “new powers” (networks, informal groups, mass media, etc.). Hence, the

strong rhetoric of “transparency” turns into a form of action that enhances the opacity of institutions, groups and networks that lack a visible “face”.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the European Union in its *White Paper on Governance in the European Union* defines as its main goal to “enhance democracy”, because “despite its achievements, many Europeans feel alienated from the Union’s work” (2001, p. 7). This “disenchantment” would only be overcome through the implementation of principles of “good governance”, that is, openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness, and coherence, governmental aspects that gain legitimacy from the practice of comparability resulting in a generalization of benchmarks, standards, and policy guidelines.

This new approach to European affairs reveals, clearly, a strategy to move the discussion away from matters of *government* (habited by citizens, elections, representation, etc.) and place it in the more diffused level of *governance* (habited by networks, peer review, agreements, etc.). Policy formulation and government action are no longer matters of “straight forward” decision making by citizens, representatives and politicians. Policy is constructed, legitimized and finally put into action through “new means” that are intended to find the most beneficial or efficient solution. A logic of *perpetual comparison* legitimizes a policy that is built around a rhetoric of “identity” and “diversity”, leading nevertheless to similar solutions. This is the current paradox of comparative approaches, and that is why we should carefully analyse their uses in political and educational debates.

Moving away from definitions, one must seek current strategies that are used as modes of governance, as it is the case of “benchmarking practices”. Initially used in management, these practices are nowadays one of the most successful tools for implementing governance policies. Keith Sisson and Paul Margison (2001) claim that benchmarking offers a way to achieve co-ordination without “apparent” (*sic*) threat to national sovereignty. They quote the President of the European Commission in a speech to the European Round Table of Industrialists:

Increasingly, rather than legal regulation and collective bargaining being the main engines of Europeanization, it is developments involving benchmarking that are to the fore. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to suggest that, in terms of EU policy making, benchmarking is acquiring quasi-regulatory status, raising major questions for theory and practice (Sisson and Margison, 2001, p. 2).

This statement clearly defines the practice of benchmarking not only as a technique or a method of inquiry, but as a political stance. Benchmarking – and, for that matter, *comparability* – is constructed as a political solution that will become *the* policy. By articulating a regulatory status to standards of achievement and production, national politicians will have no choice but to relate to them and hence provide a practice that will achieve the benchmarks signaled at an international level. This is, in fact, a new form of organization that ultimately creates a process of regulation and governing that is to be relocated into every political context, as is obvious in the analysis of the *European Report on Quality of School Education* (May 2000) which addresses the “challenge of data and comparability”. This document identifies “the need to set quantifiable targets, indicators and benchmarks as a means of comparing best practice and as instruments for monitoring and reviewing the progress achieved”, in order to provide a basis for “educational policy making”. The question is not if it is reasonable to organize a league table for schools or for nations, but if it is reasonable to create an educational discourse, one that includes indicators, outcomes, data and knowledge, ultimately becoming a regulating rule,

obliging everyone to refer back to it.

This kind of comparative mood is far from the traditional logic that has for many years dominated the field of Comparative Education, and that resides on ideas of borrowing or lending of “successful” reforms and practices. It is also distanced from the idea of the “international argument” which claims that the reference to foreign experiences is one of the main legitimizing strategies for educational reforms at the national level. Rather, the current *comparability* is not only promoted as a way of knowing or legitimizing, but mainly as a way of governing. Comparative research is important regardless of its conclusions or even its recommendations. It is important as a *mode of governance*, one of the most powerful being administered not only in Europe but also worldwide.

Against this background, we will argue, in the next section, that it is necessary to historicize comparative approaches, in order to contextualize concepts and to avoid a circulation of ideas that lack social roots or structural locations. We are aware of the obvious criticism that may arise here: does not the motive for comparative analysis reside in its “displacement”, allowing for an interpretation that goes beyond the historicity of each individual case? This would be a valid criticism only if we limit the discussion to traditional conceptions of “comparison” and “history”. To be able to overcome these traditional conceptions, we are calling for a re-conceptualization of the relations between space and time in historical and comparative research, building the bridge for reconciliation between comparison and history.

In fact, it would be possible to elaborate on the idea that global forces are changing the role of the state in education, and demand attention to factors that go beyond the local level, and hence should call for a methodology that highlights these supranational trends (Dale, 1999). But it would also be possible to sustain that “the effects of globalization differ from place to place”, drawing our attention back “to the nature and implication of such differential effects even at the national level” (Crossley, 2002). It is not our intention to argue in one or another direction. Our question is placed at a very different level. What we want to understand are the different uses of comparative approaches. For this purpose we distinguish a use that builds up *comparison as a mode of governance* from a perspective that looks at *comparison as a historical journey*.

3. COMPARABILITY AS A HISTORICAL JOURNEY

In the past decade, the word *turn* has invaded epistemological debates in several disciplines: the *linguistic turn*, the *pictorial turn*, and so on. Recently, some scholars are referring to the *comparativist turn*, as a way to overcome the fragilities and the weaknesses of the comparative field (Chryssochoou, 2001). In fact, looking at different disciplines dealing with comparative approaches, such as anthropology, literature, political science or education, it is easy to identify a feeling of fragmentation and incompleteness. For some scholars, this fragmentation is not an impediment, but rather implies a sense of “methodological opportunism”: “If game theory works, I use it. If what is called for is a historical account, I do that. If deconstruction is needed, I will even try deconstruction. I have no principles” (Przeworsky, 1996, p. 10). There is no doubt that the plasticity of the field is, at the same time, one of the main reasons for its popularity as well as for its ambiguity. This plasticity is also the reason that scholars, like ourselves, are calling for a clarification of the concept of *comparability*, in order to understand the limitations and the potentialities of comparative research. By doing so, we are not introducing a new discussion to the field, but exploring ways in which we can enhance and re-introduce what Cowen (2000) calls “the core question of the field”.

Building a case in favour of a deeper historical perspective of comparative studies, we will argue that

this is one of the ways – not the only way, of course – to clarify comparison, avoiding the “vaporous thinking” that infiltrates research approaches, namely in education. In fact, many of the current works in the field of Comparative Education are part of an inquiry that perceives change as part of a “global change”, one that is not located in specific contexts or histories, but that is a consequence of “global winds”. These winds of change seem “vapour” in the sense that they are not rooted in a concrete reality, that is, in a well identified *space-time*. Not only is it impossible to analyse any educational problem without a clear understanding of its historical location, but this way of thinking – and here the metaphor of the *gas* is useful – occupies the totality of the space available, therefore eliminating the possibility of alternative methods and approaches.

Before moving forward, we must explain the notion of “history” that we are referring to. This is the notion of history as portrayed by Michel Foucault – a history of problems located in the present:

The question I start off with is: what are we and what are we today? What is this instant that is ours? Therefore, if you like, it is a history that starts off from this present day actuality. (...) I will say that it's the history of problematizations, that is, the history of the way in which things become a problem. (...) So, it is not, in fact, the history of theories or the history of ideologies or even the history of mentalities that interests me, but the history of problems, moreover, if you like, it is the genealogy of problems that concerns me (cf. Lotringer, 1996, pp. 411-414).

“The genealogy of problems”, as Foucault presents it, is a history that understands *facts* to be objects of knowledge brought into view and highlighted in a conceptual system in which specific processes are seen as *problems*. We argue that strengthening a “comparison in time” is the best position through which we may be able to divert comparative studies from being directly organized as “policy” instead of “research”. We are aware of the fact that analyses of educational reforms, even when they adopt a “chronological reference”, are often characterized by their lack of historical thickness. That is why we call for a re-conceptualization of space-time relations, in order to build a historical understanding that allows a reconciliation of history with a comparative perspective.

3.1. Re-conceptualizing space-time relations

One of the main topics of the current historiographic debate is the re-conceptualization of space and time, the “space-time of historical reflection”. The heart of the argumentation in this debate resides in the acceptance of the idea that a purely physical definition of space and a chronological definition of time are no longer sufficient. In a postmodern era, it has become clear that we cannot continue to think of space and time as autonomous entities, ignoring the fact that space and time tend to merge into the same reality. We have become so used to thinking in a fixed (bordered) space and concentrating on time as a variable of change that it is difficult to break away from this framework. The metaphors of an “arrow of time” or of history as a “river that flows” are clear illustrations of this basic understanding.

For the past decade, globalization theories have come to authorize a way of thinking that has had fundamental influence upon academic research and epistemological orientations. Among these, there is the notion that events happening in one place and time may have important impact upon other places. Anthony Giddens (1990), for instance, refers to the idea that in the pre-modern world, time and space were inseparable, congealed in the local, that is, in a specific “place”. In the transition to modernization, space separates itself from place, and time becomes the abstract time on the calendar or the clock. Nowadays, time and space should

be conceived as virtual entities, with space being defined through global interconnections and flux of communication, and time separating itself from the clock. Hence, the concept of globalization creates a non-linear dependency between peoples, places, organizations and technological systems worldwide. In such multi-system, there is always a “disorder within order”, in which these interdependencies problematize the notion of global relations (Urry, 2002).

The re-conceptualization of space-time relations is problematic, because it implies a rupture with the sensorial conception of space and time, as “things” that can be physically touched. The process of re-conceptualizing space and time entails a need to adopt a perspective of an immaterial space (a space of flows and communications, of meanings and interpretations), and, simultaneously, to understand the different “times” that co-exist in a given “time period”. This discussion has been present in the scientific debates for over a century, but the social sciences have been unable to incorporate it into their own ways of conceiving research:

The mechanistic world-view indeed officially ended at the beginning of this century. Einstein’s relativity theory broke up Newton’s universe of absolute space and time into a multitude of space-time frames each tied to a particular observer, who therefore, not only has a different clock, but also a different map. Stranger still, quantum theories demanded that we stop seeing things as separate solid objects with definite (simple) locations in space and time. Instead, they are de-localized, indefinite, mutually entangled entities (Ho, 1997, p. 44).

In this statement Mae-Wan Ho is directly addressing the need to move away from a fixed conception of space and time. In fact, the production of new knowledge is related to the possibility of distancing ourselves from a “sensorial perspective”, adopting displacements and ways of looking that create new “illuminations”, in the sense portrayed by Walter Benjamin (1968). Somewhat similarly, Stephen Greenblatt’s (1998) concept of “new historicism” shifts the centre of the comparative-historical literary research to a space of time rather than a thread of time. Greenblatt conceptualizes time as a “contested space” in which periods and “linear” time overlap each other, highlighting the different objects and subjects of power preserved, modified or intensified over time. Or, to use the words of Mae-Wan Ho: “the here and now contains in its essence a myriad of there and thens” (1997, p. 44).

Another important example of efforts to re-think notions of time and space was introduced in a recent book, which compares the perspectives of space and time in the work of Einstein and Picasso. In this book, Arthur Miller shows the early 20th century fascination with a “fourth dimension”, with all its implications for principles of movement and history: “The main lesson of Einstein’s 1905 relativity theory is that in thinking about these subjects, we cannot trust our senses. Picasso and Einstein believed that art and science are means for exploring worlds beyond perceptions, beyond appearances” (Miller, 2001, p. 4).

It is interesting to note that similar processes of re-conceptualizing time-space in comparative studies has been evident in various comparative disciplines. In ethnography, Michael Burawoy challenges notions of a global, one-dimensional place and time, explaining the need “to understand the incessant movement of our subjects, the mosaic of their proliferating imaginations” (2000, pp. 4-5). Within the discipline of comparative literature, works by diverse scholars such as Hayden White, Stephen Greenblatt, Richard Terdiman, Stephen Kern, Lyndia Liu and many others, try to provide the tools for re-envisioning literary history and re-conceptualizing it within modern conceptions of cultural studies. Historical documents (and literature)

become more than objective records or transcription of experience. They must be assessed as to their participation in a cultural exchange or struggle for meaning and power. Literature, in this framework, works as a text among many cultural texts, all of which can illuminate the contest for meaning and power in history. These methodological approaches attempt to define concepts of space and time in a non-linear way, enabling comparative research to free itself from traditional notions of place (those that usually have to do with the nation-state) and time (a concept that usually would refer to linear time chronology placed in the Western-modern history).

In these various interpretations of space and time, as well as the role of these concepts in different disciplines and research, we are confronting a new idea that invites us to look at the *width* and *thickness* of time. A *width* that enables historical fluidity, conceiving the present not as a “period” but as a process of transformation of the past into the future (and vice-versa). It is unfeasible to conceive historical thinking without inscribing “memories” and “imaginings” into our inquiry. The invention of history was not possible in “cold societies”, that is, societies without an idea of future. To analyse the French Revolution, for example, is not only to reconstruct past events in an attempt to describe what “really happened”, rather, it is to understand how the French Revolution became a “problem” that is present in our current discussions and debates. It is also to understand how histories of the French Revolution have been constructed and reconstructed throughout different periods, legitimizing ideologies and political stances, as well as giving rise to interpretations and projects that define our ways of thinking about this event, and about its importance and influence on current events. It is only by “widening” the concept of time, creating a historical conception that is multi-dimensional and capable of capturing more than the one-dimensional linear time continuum, that history can be understood in all its fluidity.

It is, however, at the same time crucial in comparative research to be aware of the *thickness* of time. This thickness that makes us live, simultaneously, different temporalities overlapping in such a manner that time is no longer a single “thread” (the thread of time) but is represented with a string in which many threads are intertwined. Let us think, for example, of colonial and post-colonial studies, where this dimension is quite evident. Traditionally, when discussing colonial and post-colonial regimes, the argumentation is based on distinct cultures and identities with different relations to time and space, and with diverse conceptions of history. A useful metaphor to illustrate this idea is a “geological formation”, where we find several layers of time that cannot be understood without taking into account their specificities, as well as the commonalities that connect and influence each and every layer. More than introducing a device into these different strata, the historian needs to provoke an earthquake in order to understand how these layers work, how they are connected and disconnected, producing contested explanations for the same “event”. It is only in such form of analysis that we can conceptualize post-colonial realities, that is, by looking at various layers of power, culture, imagination and identity. Then, we will be able to understand how different discourses, languages, histories and times are connected, where they are disconnected, and how they ultimately create “new” communities and societies.

3.2. Reconciling history and comparison

To overcome the current state of comparative studies we must reconcile history and comparison. Both may inform one another, but we resist the notion that comparative education “has the capacity to do in space what educational history does in time” (Grant, 2000, p. 316). Accounting for space and time is a necessity for both disciplines. Our argument is that we need to consider the manner in which a historical study deals with *space*, and a comparative study deals with *time* (and vice-versa).

In the post-modern era the world is within easy reach to those with the power to determine meaning. It is in this context in which we witness an increasingly instantaneous moment in time, a compression of space and

time: “The present being dramatized as much as the past seems a cause without effect and the future an effect without cause” (Santos, 1998). This presumed lack of ability to differentiate between places, times, causes and effects, the immediateness of events, is why one of the main tasks of comparative scholars, and also of historians, is to make an effort to *multiply space* (spaces) and to *unfold time* (times) opening up visions towards new understandings. This is the theoretical basis that would allow reconciliation between history and comparison.

In order to accommodate such developments in comparative and historical research, the “come back” of comparative research needs to be accompanied by two related movements. On the one hand, the adoption of methodological perspectives that do not consecrate models of analysis exclusively centred on national geographies, and that are able to understand the multiplicity of levels of affiliation and belonging that characterize communities around the world (Cowen, 2000; Crossley, 2002). On the other hand, the reinforcement of a thinking that lies in the logic of comparison in time, moving away from a floatation of concepts, lacking roots or locations. It is basically a question of overcoming the gulf between experience and expectation, conceiving comparative-historical research as a constant production of meanings. Or, in other words, as an immense playing field defined by the necessity to produce sound and rigorous statements, and at the same time, being open to an infinity of interpretations. Let us further elaborate on these two movements.

Multiplying Spaces

Despite its evolution, Comparative Education has remained deeply attached to the *materiality* of the nation-state as the main unit of observation and analysis. This is, of course, not a phenomenon unique to comparative education. The study of comparative literature, for example, has a similar tradition of basing comparisons on the premises of nation-focused concepts. Some leading literary figures, such as Pierre Brunel, Claude Pichois, and Andrea-Michele Rousseau, ironically claimed that the comparative literary study should have been called “comparative national literatures” (Hokenson, 2000). Also, if we consider the field of political science, we recognize that the tradition of seeing politics as taking place either within or among independent states is still predominant (Stepan, 2001). The re-examination of this one-dimensional bordered space is a precondition for the renewal of comparative studies.

Arjun Appadurai presents a clearly articulated description of the way in which space should be depicted in current research in his book *Modernity at large* (1996). Appadurai suggests that in order to conceptualize the new role that “space” and “nation” have in the global era, one must adopt the concept of *scapes* (ethnoscape, ideoscape, mediascape, etc.), advocating an alternative spatial rendering of the present, one that is not “fixed” as a typical landscape may be: “Imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is a key component of the new global order” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 32). This concept is one that is detached from any geographical scape, but is located in imaginary and virtual “flows” through which communities are created.

These ideas invite us to look to a space that is not limited to its physical margins. In truth, as Thomas Popkewitz shows, temporal concepts are displaced by spatial ones through “the making of maps”, “the development of discursive fields”, “regionality”, “localities”, “terrain”, “imagined communities” and “institutional geographies”, “ideological space”, and “topographies of the person”:

The use of spatial concepts entails rethinking the ideas of history, progress, and agency that have been inscribed from nineteenth century social theory. The concept of space in post-modern theories has both representational and physical qualities. (...)

The focus of post-modern literature is how social spaces are constructed not as geographical concepts alone but as discourses that produce identities (1999, pp. 27-28).

We are arguing in favour of a conceptualization of space that can capture virtual, imaginary and geographical spaces at once, moving away from a sensorial perspective, that is, a space that can be fixed, bordered and touched. This does not mean that we should ignore the role still played by nation-states, as stated by Burawoy: “The dense ties that once connected civil society to the state are being detached and redirected across national boundaries to form a thickening global public sphere. Yet these connections and flows are not autonomous, are not arbitrary patterns crossing in the sky, but are shaped by the strong magnetic fields of nation states” (2000, p. 34). Yet we need to take into account a redefinition of space and time, in order to recognize the importance of an *immaterial space*, built around memories and imaginations, identities and affiliations, networks and communication.

Unfolding Times

Reinhart Koselleck, in his work on *The future past*, hypothesizes that, in determining the difference between past and future (or between experience and expectation), we create conditions to apprehend the *time of history*: “We saw throughout the centuries a time construction of history, that led to this singular form of acceleration that is characteristic of the current world” (1990, pp. 20-21). Koselleck portrays history as though there is past in the present, not only as a “before” and as an “after”, but as a “during” that resides in a present of several modes. It does not reside as a “physical action”, but as a complexity of memories and projects building senses of identity. Similarly, in comparative literature, the concept of “imaginative space” is the basis of an argument that transfers the centre of literary studies from the writer to the reader, that is, creating a space in which the reader’s imagination compensates and creates new realities (Iser, 2000).

Adopting a different approach, Zaki Laïdi talks about a collective renegotiation of our relation to space and to time: “a space that is extended and a time that is accelerated”(1998, p. 10). Comparative scholars, as well as historians, are asked to take into consideration not only “geographical” spaces, but more importantly “spaces of meaning” (Laïdi, 1998). These spaces of meaning are placed in a social and conceptual environment where the “instant” (immediateness) is linked with a deeper understanding of the very long duration of origins and universes. In this sense, historical time is also compressed and extended, underlining the limits of our interpretations.

In this, we are facing an important role for historical research within the comparative discipline, one that would enable comparative work to trace the conceptualization of ideas and the formation of knowledge over time and space. One could picture such a theoretical framework for comparative studies as a multidimensional process in which research is grounded in “local histories”, but is based and embedded in different forces, connections, times and places. The reception of each of these histories in different “presents” will produce an individual, historically contingent social, cultural and educational discourse.

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical post-humously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he

establishes conception of the present at the *time of the now* which is shot through with chips of Messianic time (Benjamin, 1968, p. 263).

Educational systems have been defined as a consequence of events in which they play a role in determining, and of which they are themselves a result. There is in addition a clear connection between comparative research and social and political processes of historical change. Benjamin's notion of "Messianic time" refers to the idea that human history is a nearly undetectable fraction of the totality of historical time, coinciding with the fact that the historical present is merely an abridgement of the entire history of humankind. Benjamin thus opens up another possibility for a comparative-historical approach.

We call for a re-conceptualization of space-time relations, so as to build a historical understanding which will allow for a reconciliation between history and comparison. Alexander Stille refers to the idea that the "loss of historical memory" is hardly unique to our age (2002, p. xiii), but we believe it requires an added dimension in the contemporary context, calling for the construction of an interpretative space which is historically grounded. The definition of new *zones of looking* is, probably, the most important challenge for comparative research in the 21st century. This implies a sophistication of our theories, binding together historical and comparative approaches so as to gather a new understanding of *problems* in the educational field.

4. FINAL COMMENTS

By presenting the current condition of comparative educational research and the research trends that have resulted in its renewed popularity, our intention was to present the extremes. On the one hand, the definitions of Comparative education as a *mode of governance* and on the other hand, its importance as a *historical journey*. Between these two extremes there is room to imagine different positions and dispositions for Comparative Education. In a certain sense, one can argue that the interest of the field resides precisely in the presence of several and distinct traditions. But these various traditions need to be analytically separated. Otherwise, we are bound to be entangled in an amalgamation of principles and concepts, a mixture that is the main reason for the depreciation of Comparative Education and for its transformation into an "academic folklore".

This is why, counter-current to mainstream comparative thinking, we are advocating for the need for a deeper historical perspective. We are not referring, obviously, to a "narrow history", enclosed within a linear vision of time and a geographical notion of space. Such a linear understanding of history is useless for comparative purposes. Rather, we are referring to a history that enables us to understand the problems of the present through an analysis of the way they have been and are constituted throughout the past and present, enabling a constitution of the future:

History, with its rigid paradigms of order, comes to shore up the insecure ramparts of a failing memory. Untangling the strands of the past – or submitting to their confusing but exhilarating intricacy – cannot simply be an act of recognition, of fitting events into fixed patterns, of just seeing the light. It must begin, rather, by apprehending the sources of light and the present objects they shed or illuminate, and follow with an active, incessant engagement in the process of naming and renaming, covering and uncovering, consuming and producing new relations, investigating hierarchies of power and effect: distilling light into sun, moon and fire. Just as maps interpret and redefine terrain in the image of their makers, history can yield both past and

prospective orders (Alcalay, 1993, p. 2)

Here, we are referring to an analysis of the present as part of historical practices that produce ways of thinking, acting, and feeling. In this sense, as Popkewitz, Franklin and Pereyra claim, history is not the movement toward some form of reliable representation, it is rather a part of the present: “A cultural history as a history of the present considers reason as a field of cultural practices that orders the ways that problems are defined, and possibilities and innovations sought” (2001, p. 4).

The project of raising an understanding of the historical specificity of educational phenomena and simultaneously acknowledging the radical presence of the other(s) defines a new agenda for comparative research. As argued by Fritz Ringer, “there is simply no other means of arriving at explanations, and not just descriptions, of change in education than the comparative approach” (cf. Schriewer & Nóvoa, 2001, p. 4222).

The focus of Comparative Education should not be on the “facts” or the “realities”, but on *problems*. By definition, the facts (events, countries, systems, etc.) are incomparable. It is possible to highlight differences and similarities, but it is hard to go further. Only *problems* can constitute the basis for complex comparisons: problems that are anchored in the present, but that possess a history and anticipate different possible futures; problems that are located and relocated in places and times, through processes of transfer, circulation and appropriation; problems that can only be elucidated through the adoption of new *zones of looking* that are inscribed in a space delimited by frontiers of meaning, and not only by physical boundaries.

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